

COMMENTS REGARDING THE DEPARTURE OF ECU CHANCELLOR CECIL STATON

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Today's announcement that Dr. Cecil Staton is stepping down as Chancellor East Carolina University ends one of the saddest and most unfortunate chapters in the history of North Carolina higher education. Chancellor Staton has the strong support of his trustees and university community, received a positive job evaluation in the last six months and has done nothing to warrant termination of his service. I came to know him well as the Board of Governors liaison to ECU. Cecil Staton is a good man and great leader.

Yet, despite what would normally be a record to be applauded, Chancellor Staton was asked to resign by the interim UNC president, Bill Roper, in an effort to end the long-running campaign of false accusations and irrational attacks by Harry Smith, the chairman of the UNC Board of Governors.

The UNC Board of Governors has never met to discuss any possible termination of Chancellor Staton. Despite that and the Board's clear policy granting only the Board of Governors authority to terminate a Chancellor (UNC Policy Manual 300.1.1), Dr. Roper took the highly unusual step of negotiating and reaching a termination agreement with Chancellor Staton without consulting or even providing prior notice to the UNC Board of Governors. He acted unilaterally and was not authorized by the Board of Governors to take any action regarding Chancellor Staton. The Board of Governors has spent hours discussing where to put a statue at Chapel Hill and absolutely no time discussing whether the ECU Chancellor should be asked to leave.

This extraordinary series of events underscores the fact that Dr. Roper's actions were based on politics, not the Chancellor's performance. Specifically, Dr. Roper acted to satisfy Harry Smith's irrational personal vendetta against the Chancellor. Harry Smith has been seeking the Chancellor's removal ever since Chancellor Staton and his trustees rejected in 2016 Mr. Smith's proposal to buy an apartment complex near ECU if the University would change its housing policy. Since that time, he has become obsessed with removing the Chancellor. President Margaret Spellings told me months ago that in virtually every conversation she had with Harry Smith he turned the conversation eventually to ECU and his criticism of the school's leaders. I and other members of the Board of Governors have had a similar experience.

The public would be greatly disappointed and surprised if they knew the persistent and extreme actions that Harry Smith has taken to undermine Chancellor Staton as well as the hours of fruitless, wasted energy spent by ECU trustees and UNC System administrators addressing how to deal with Harry Smith and his daily threats and attacks. Since 2016, Harry Smith has subjected ECU leaders to never-ending criticism. He has repeatedly criticized the university's purchase of a Chancellor's residence even though it cost less than refurbishing the old one, has said the Chancellor was responsible for a downturn in athletic revenues that resulted from declining football revenues and a conference exit fee paid before Chancellor Staton arrived, and falsely accused Chancellor Staton of not reporting accurately information on his professional biographical record – a charge that was investigated by the Board of Governors Audit Committee

and thoroughly rejected. Harry Smith has relentlessly spoken ill of Chancellor Staton in contacts with Board of Trustee members, threatened not to re-appoint trustees who support Chancellor Staton or to deny ECU funding if the trustees continued to support the Chancellor. He has relayed to Board of Governors members a false report that the Chancellor's chief of staff thought he should be removed. And he falsely stated in November 2018 that he was recusing himself from East Carolina University affairs – likely because his misleading attacks had exposed the UNC System to potential liability. At the same time that he has engaged in these behind the scenes actions, Harry Smith has publicly professed support for the Chancellor.

Harry Smith also has undermined Chancellor Staton by meddling far too much in the management of ECU. Last year, he attempted, without the Chancellor's approval, to negotiate an employment contract with the interim ECU athletic director. He also contacted another university to discuss its legal dispute with ECU without obtaining the Chancellor's approval of the contact – something that no board member should do.

Cecil Staton brought great energy, innovation and wisdom to the Chancellor's office. He launched a new marketing and branding campaign to increase awareness of ECU nationally and internationally; laid out initiatives to increase research activity; developed a plan to double the number of students participating in study abroad; increased the enrollment of the ECU Honors College; launched an initiative to increase enrollment at the Brody School of Medicine by 50% over the next five years; and obtained a partnership with the computer data analytics firm, SAS, for a Rural Prosperity Initiative to improve rural living through improvements in healthcare, education, and economic development. He has worked tirelessly to launch and support a \$500 million capital campaign, the largest in ECU's history, by meeting with alumni and donors throughout the United States. The Chancellor's wife told me that he is on the road or at university events most nights of the week working to support ECU.

All of that momentum has now been lost. Harry Smith has done damage to the University of North Carolina system and particularly to East Carolina University. Until he is gone, Harry Smith will continue to do damage to our State's greatest asset.

Attachment:

UNC Policy Manual - Section 300.1.1. (specifically Section II.A.1.c.): *“The continuance in office of the chancellor of a constituent institution is determined by the Board of Governors, which may act to terminate such an appointment upon its own initiative or upon recommendation of the president. The Board of Governors in all instances shall consult the appropriate chair of the board of trustees prior to terminating the appointment of a chancellor. The president may place a chancellor on temporary leave, with or without pay, if the president has reason to believe that illness, injury, misconduct, neglect of duty, or other circumstances may interfere with the chancellor's performance of the duties of the position. Before placing a chancellor on temporary leave, the president shall consult with the chair of the Board of Governors, the chair of the Committee on Personnel and Tenure, and the appropriate chair of the board of trustees.”*

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